

SMITH HILL, PROVIDENCE

This report is jointly sponsored and funded as a planning tool by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission and the City of Providence. Commission activities are supported by state and local funds and by the Department of the Interior, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, under provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. City funding was provided through the Mayor's Office of Community Development. It is issued as part of the program set forth in Rhode Island's "Historical Preservation Plan," first edition (1970).

The city and the state Historical Preservation Commission are jointly sponsoring a comprehensive historical survey of Providence. When complete, this planning study will include an overview report on the city as a whole and individual reports on several historic neighborhoods. Reports have been issued on South Providence and Elmwood; this Smith Hill report is the third in the series.

The Rhode Island Historical Society has made an invaluable contribution to the preparation of this report through the assistance of its staff and library.

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PLEASE NOTE:

This document is a reissue of the original survey book published in 1981. It has not been corrected or updated.

Since the original publication:

- additional properties have been entered on the National Register
- some financial incentives referred to in these pages are no longer available
- some new financial incentives are available

For up-to-date information, contact:

- Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, www.rihphc.state.ri.us

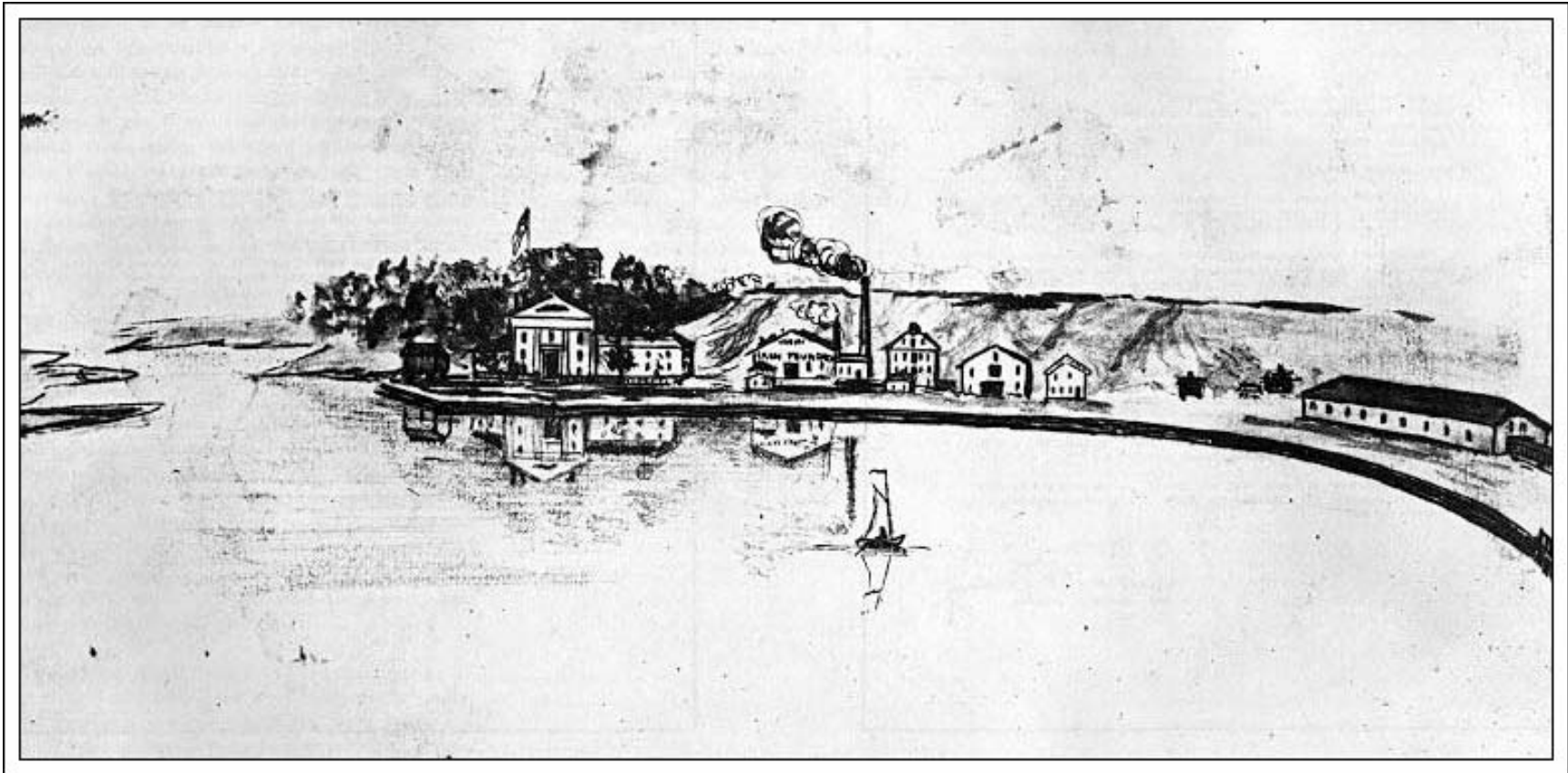
Other resources:

- City of Providence, www.providenceri.com
- Providence Preservation Society, www.ppsri.org
- Rhode Island Historical Society, www.rihs.org

Cover: Andrew Dickhaut Cottages (1883); 115-141 Bath Street.

Title Page: Smith Hill from the Great Salt Cove; watercolor, ca 1845. Circled by a promenade in the late 1840s and filled in the late 1880s, the Cove physically set Smith Hill off from the settlements to the east and south. Courtesy of the [Rhode Island Historical Society](http://www.rihs.org); RHi x3 1516

Smith Hill, Providence Statewide Historical Preservation Report P-P-4



Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission,
June 1980



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION COMMISSION

Old State House
150 Benefit Street
Providence, R.I. 02903
(401) 222-2678

June 16, 1980

The Honorable J. Joseph Garrahy, Governor
State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations
State House
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Dear Governor Garrahy:

It is with pleasure that I transmit herewith Smith Hill, Providence-- Statewide Historical Preservation Report P-P-4, the twenty-eighth publication in the Statewide Historical Preservation Report series.

This report provides an analysis of the historical and architectural growth of the Smith Hill neighborhood of Providence and recommends a preservation program which should be incorporated into the city's overall planning effort.

With the publication of this report, the Commission is well on its way to fulfilling its responsibility to record the state's rich cultural resources. Eight additional reports are now being prepared; their completion will contribute significantly toward the achievement of our goal of producing reports on all thirty-nine cities and towns in the state. Three reports have already been published concerning Providence neighborhoods: The West Side, South Providence, and Elmwood. Studies of Providence industrial sites and Downtown Providence are in final stages of preparation. In addition, a citywide overview report will be published.

The Commission believes that its effort, as represented by this and other reports, will further the cause of historical preservation in Rhode Island.

Very sincerely,

Mrs. George E. Downing
Chairman



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION COMMISSION

Old State House
150 Benefit Street
Providence, R.I. 02903
(401) 222-2678

June 16, 1980

The Honorable Vincent A. Cianci, Jr., Mayor
The City of Providence
25 Dorrance Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Dear Mayor Cianci:

The Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission is pleased to submit in final published form this survey and report Smith Hill, Providence--Statewide Preservation Report P-P-4. The product of detailed study by Wm. McKenzie Woodward of the Commission staff, it is truly a joint effort on the part of the City of Providence and the State Commission. Not only has the local financial match been supplied by your office through the City's Community Development program, but our work has further benefited from the generous efforts of many City officials and private citizens who have contributed time and shared information of great importance for this study.

Three reports have already been published concerning Providence neighborhoods: The West Side, South Providence, and Elmwood. Providence Industrial Sites and Downtown reports are nearing completion. Further, a citywide overview is in preparation and will be published.

We hope Smith Hill, Providence will prove of lasting value to the neighborhood and to the city as a whole as an educational and planning tool, serving as a guide to Smith Hill's rich history and cultural heritage and providing a vehicle to further neighborhood revitalization.

Very truly yours,

Mrs. George E. Downing
Chairman

PREFACE

In 1968, The Rhode Island General Assembly established the Historical Preservation Commission, charging it with, among other duties, the task of developing a state preservation program following the guidelines of the National Historical Preservation Act of 1966 as administered by the Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, United States Department of the Interior. Citizen members of the Commission appointed by the Governor; the chairman of the House and Senate Finance Committees of the General Assembly, the Director of the Department of Economic Development, the Director of the Department of Environmental Management, the Chief of the Division of Statewide Planning, and the State Building Code Commissioner serve as ex-officio members. The Director of the Department of Community Affairs has been appointed by the Governor as the State Historic Preservation Officer for Rhode Island.

The Historic Preservation Commission is responsible for conducting a statewide survey of historic sites and places from the survey recommending properties of local, state, or national significance for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places; administering federal grants-in-aid to Register properties for acquisition and development; and developing a state historical preservation plan. Additional duties include compiling and maintaining a State Register of Historic Places; assisting state and municipal agencies in the area of historical preservation planning by undertaking special project-review studies; and regulating archaeological exploration on state lands and under waters of state jurisdiction.

The Rhode Island Statewide Historical Survey, inaugurated in June 1969, has been designed to locate, identify, map, and report on buildings sites, areas, and objects of cultural significance. In line with the current movement among preservationists, planners, and architectural and social historians, the total environment of a survey area is considered. In addition to outstanding structures and historical sites, buildings of all types, periods, and styles which constitute the fabric of a community are recorded and evaluated. Presently, archeological resources are to be recorded in a separate survey effort.

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Smith Hill before 1873. The 1848 Boston Freight Station, still standing on Canal Street, is visible in the center. Beyond is the original St Patrick's Church. At the upper left are the bluffs surrounding the Jefferson Plain, just in front of Colonel Benjamin Smith's house (ca 1800; demolished, 1926).
Courtesy of the [Rhode Island Historical Society](#): RHi x3 2016.

I. INTRODUCTION

The historical and architectural survey of Smith Hill, Providence, Rhode Island, was initiated by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission in cooperation with the City of Providence in July, 1976. The survey was funded by the Commission through a survey and planning grant from the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service and by the city with funds made available through the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974

To accomplish the goals of the statewide survey program three stages are necessary: field survey, compilation of maps, and preparation of a final report for each area surveyed. A standard survey form, the "Historic Building Data Sheet," has been prepared by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission for use throughout the state. It incorporates both architectural and historical information and a photograph of each building or site recorded. Historical information is obtained through the use of local maps, state atlases, land and tax records, published and unpublished histories, and guidebooks and manuscripts which are readily available. The survey encompasses the neighborhood's topography; its settlement and street patterns; and its commercial, industrial, institutional, and residential buildings. Data from the survey forms is ultimately transferred onto maps so that information pertaining to historical preservation can be easily used for planning purposes.

Upon completion of the survey and review by the Commission office and in appropriate local repositories, the survey forms, maps, and final reports

are filed at the Commission office and in appropriate local repositories, such as the city or town hall, historical society, or library.

This report deals with those manifestations of Smith Hill's past which should be retained as a living, active part of the neighborhood's present and future life. Within the urban context of Providence as a whole, it attempts a concise, yet comprehensive, history of the Smith Hill neighborhood and its architectural development, together with recommendations for preservation planning. In the appendices are explanations of the National Register of Historic Places, the Grants-in-Aid program, and the survey form of the Historical Preservation Commission. An inventory of noteworthy structures and sites in Smith Hill and a list of recommendations to the National Register are also included.

The Historical Preservation Commission thanks the following organizations and individuals for their aid in completing the Smith Hill survey: Nancy Chudacoff, Anthony DiBiasio, Norma LaSalle Daoust, Helen Kebabian, Priscilla Martel, Marsha Peters, the Providence Public Library, and the staff of the City of Providence Tax Assessor's Office.

The objectives of the report are threefold: it is a planning tool, which can be used to guide future development; it is an educational resource, useful in the study of state and local history; and it can be a catalyst in awakening civic pride, helping residents to become aware of the historical and architectural environment in which they live and encouraging them to take a positive interest in the future of their neighborhood. To that end this effort is dedicated.

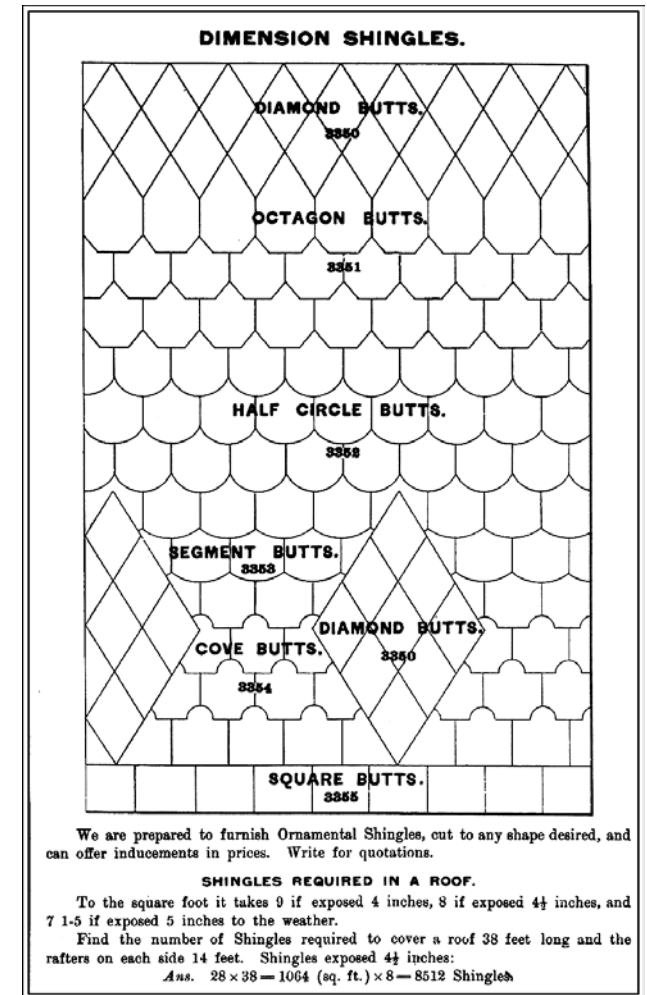


Fig 1: Ornamental shingle types, from *the Late Victorian Architectural Details*. Increased interest in picturesque surface texture in the late 19th century made shingles such as these extremely popular; many of these are commonly found on houses of the period throughout Smith Hill

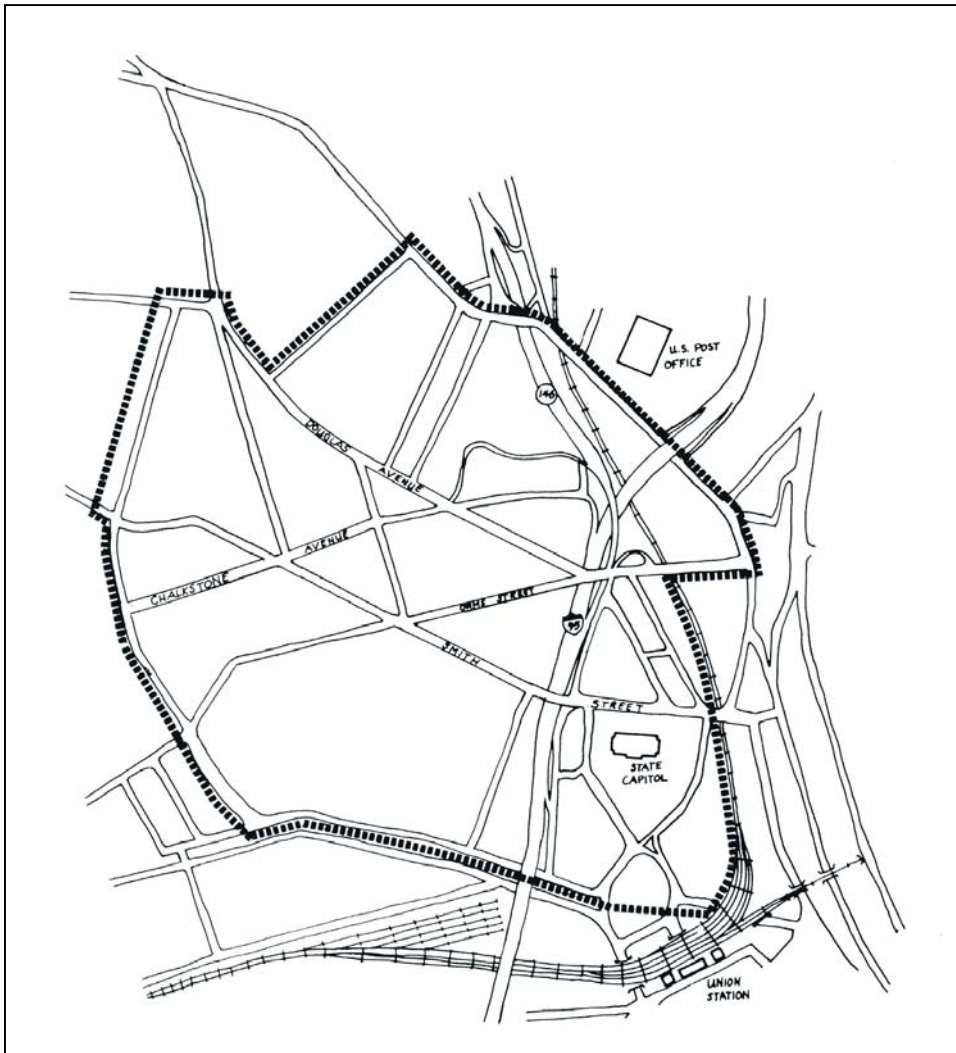


Fig 2: Map of Providence; showing the Smith Hill survey area.

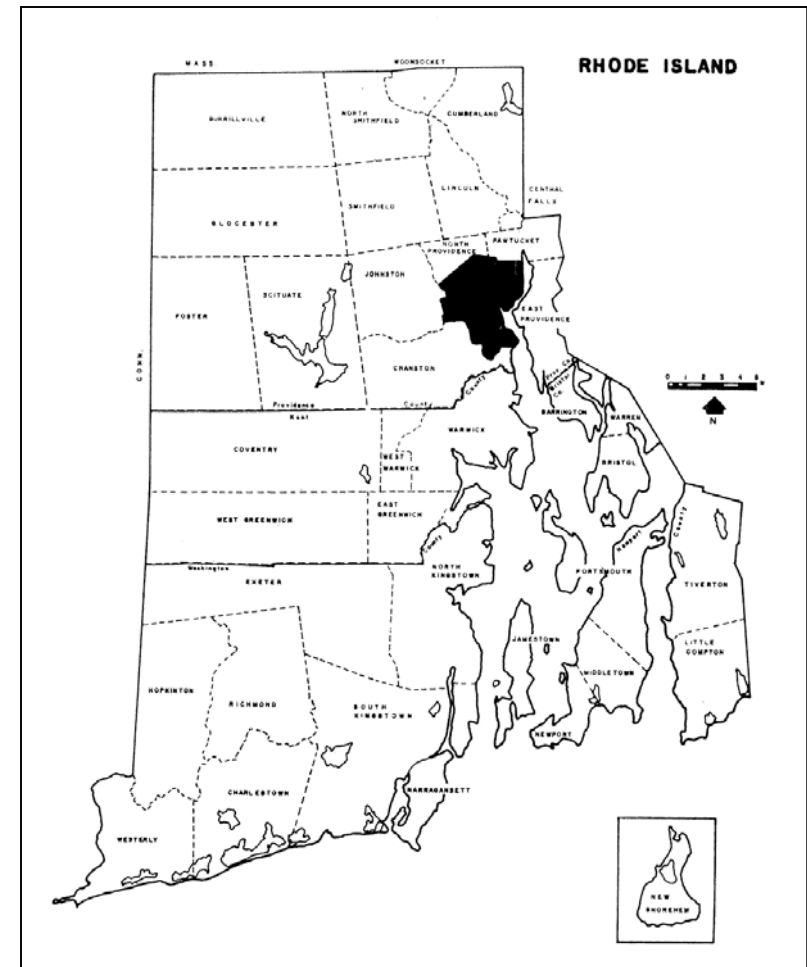


Fig 3: Map of Rhode Island; showing the location of Providence.

II. SETTING

The Smith Hill Neighborhood is a small, densely built-up, largely residential area to the northwest of the Providence central business district. The predominant building type is the wood-frame dwelling, either two-and-a-half or three stories and constructed between 1875 and 1925. House lots are small and generally uniform in their narrow end orientation to the often treeless streets. These houses are complemented by small commercial buildings and blocks, located primarily at intersections of major streets. Institutional buildings—schools, churches, libraries, neighborhood centers—are dotted through the neighborhood. Mid-twentieth-century urban decay has occasioned random demolition, but the dense built fabric remains largely intact.

This residential core was for years bordered on the south and east by heavy industrial development along the rivers. While a number of these nineteenth-century industrial buildings remains, many of those located to the east along the Moshassuck River have disappeared.

Smith Hill remains today a working-class neighborhood, much as it developed. While ethnic composition of the neighborhood has changed, Smith Hill retains something of its sense of community. The traditional center of the oldest immigrant community in Providence, the Irish, Smith Hill attracted over the years other ethnic groups, including Russian Jews, Swedes, and Armenians. Some of these populations have virtually abandoned Smith Hill, but others remain in strong concentration. This ethnic continuity along with certain geographical buffers has maintained the definition of the neighborhood.

The neighborhood, as its name suggests, is situated on a hill—one of the so-called Seven Hills of Providence—which reaches its crest of approximately seventy feet above sea level on Smith Street near the Capitol. The land declines slightly to the north and west and drops less gently toward the Woonasquatucket River on the south and to the Moshassuck River on the

For the purposes of this survey, it is defined geographically as that area bounded on the east and southeast by the railroad tracks; on the southwest by the Woonasquatucket River; on the west by the Dean Street Connector, Pleasant Valley Parkway, Raymond Street, and Oakland Avenue; on the northwest by Douglas Avenue, the Chad Brown-Admiral Terrace Housing Project, and Admiral Street; and on the northeast by Route 146 and Orms Street.

Physical definition of the neighborhood as it exists today is the result of an evolutionary development of boundaries. When Providence was first settled—and

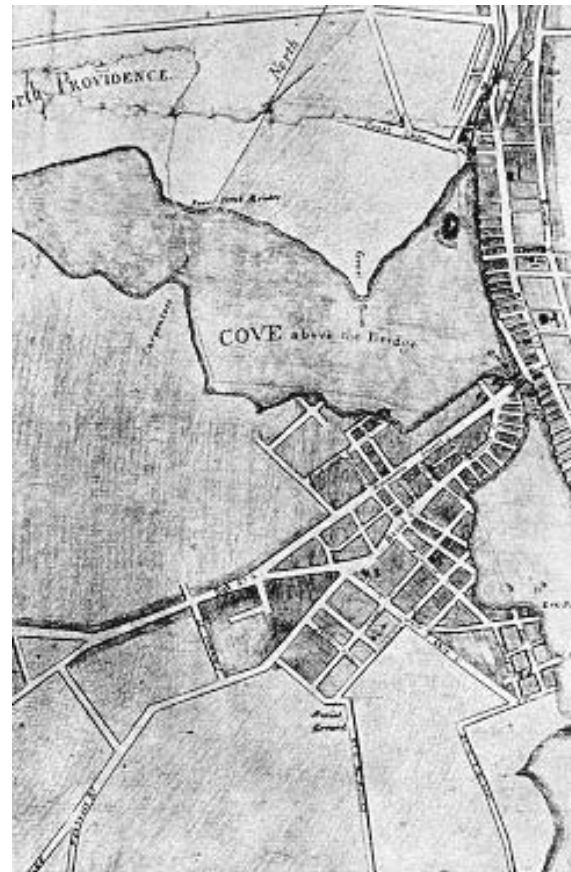


Fig.4: Section, Map of Providence (1803); by Daniel Anthony. Courtesy of the [Rhode Island Historical Society](#): RHi x3 2705.

until 1846—Smith Hill was separated from the East Side and Downtown Providence by natural boundaries: the Moshassuck and Woonasquatucket Rivers and the Great Salt Cove. Improvements to both rivers, the creation of the Cove Basin, and the eventual filling of the Cove have virtually eliminated these bodies of water as physical boundaries. The political changes in the area have also affected its growth; from 1765 to 1874 the area approximately northwest of I-95 was part of North Providence, a factor which served somewhat to limit its urbanization. Finally, a number of large-scale building projects which surround Smith Hill serve as buffers, confining the neighborhood to a small area. The railroad tracks and the industrial corridor form the longest of these man-made barriers. The Capitol and its extensive sloping grounds further separate the residential core of Smith Hill from Downtown Providence, and the construction of I-95 and Route 146 have reinforced this isolation of the neighborhood along its southern and western edges. The grounds of two late nineteenth-century estates—the Davis Estate, now the site of Veterans' Hospital, and the Chase-Burke Estate, now the site of Nathaniel Greene Middle School—provide large open spaces which have physically limited continuous western growth. Similarly, the Chad Brown-Admiral Terrace Housing Project marks a northern limit of Smith Hill, both today as a developed parcel and, until its construction, as vacant, privately held land. Government projects begun in the 1950s have created large buffer zones in Route 146, the West River Redevelopment Area, and the Randall Square Redevelopment Area.

Smith Hill is traversed by five primary thoroughfares: fanning out from the eastern end are—roughly northwest-southeast—Smith Street, Douglas Avenue, and Admiral Street and—roughly northeast-southwest—Orms Street and Chalkstone Avenue. Interstate Highway 95 is a major—and inaccessible—axis which divides the eastern quarter of Smith Hill from the remainder of the neighborhood. The irregular triangular and trapezoidal areas created by these large arteries are divided by short cross streets, laid out independently by numerous nineteenth century developers, creating a somewhat random street pattern.



Fig 5: Smith Hill in 1857, from the 1857 map of Providence by Henry F. Walling. Courtesy of the [Rhode Island Historical Society](#); RHi x3 2770.